New Research

On November 5, 2011, we published our research on Google Places in a whitepaper entitled, Eye Tracking and Click Mapping Google Places. In that study, we had participants run through four tasks using Google Places on a desktop computer. Using eye tracking technology, we recorded where people looked on the computer screen, and we also mapped where they clicked. From this research, we were able to make some recommendations about what businesses need to do to get the most from a Google Places listing.

As a follow up to that research, we decided to take the same tasks we had given participants in the original Google Places study, and see what happens when we try it on a mobile device; in this case, an Apple iPhone using the free Google Places app.

Going into this study, we expected that some of the findings we had made in the previous study would still hold true on the iPhone. One of the differences we noted between the two studies was that participants would sometimes scroll further down the listings than they did on the desktop computer environment. We attribute this to a couple of things:

1. There is considerably less space on an iPhone screen compared to a computer screen, so only three complete business listings can be seen at once on the iPhone. If none of the first three listings enticed a click the first time they were seen, then people started scrolling down the page. Of course, sometimes they scrolled back up and clicked on a listing they had already scanned.

2. The iPhone interface makes it fast and easy to scroll up and down, so that ease of use means the value of looking at additional listings outweighs any small inconvenience caused by having to scroll.

Because of the limited screen size on the iPhone, eye tracking results were much like you would expect. People started by looking on the left side, then across the listing, and then back and down to the next listing. After a couple of listings were viewed, that scanning pattern might break as they either move down the right side, looking at images or start scrolling down the left side.
Google Places on the iPhone

Introduction

Methodology

We used real live pages from the Google Places iPhone app. We let participants enter their own search term to complete the search tasks they were all assigned. We tested eye tracking on twelve individuals who came to the TiveTank™ research room in Mediative’s Toronto office.

Demographically, we had an even number of male and female participants, ranging in age from 21 to 45.

The testing was conducted on November 21, 2011. Based on qualitative feedback from the eye tracking participants, as well as analysis of their individual and aggregated eye tracking sessions, we have drawn some conclusions about how visual attention is distributed across the Google Places app search results pages.

Every participant in the study was given the same scenario as in the previous Google Places study – an imaginary road trip with stops in Hamilton, London, Winnipeg and Edmonton, with the task of choosing a place for a friend to get a tattoo in each of those cities based on the Google Places search results. From the participants in the eye tracking part of our study, we recorded each individual session, and then compiled the sessions to create heat maps that represent aggregate gaze data and supplement the qualitative findings.
THE EYE TRACKING RESULTS

Heat Maps

Look to your left, and see an example of how a participant’s eyes scanned the iPhone screen in the first 5 seconds. The numbers show the gaze sequence timeline, and the size of the yellow dots represent the relative amount of time this person spent looking at that part of the screen. We can see here that the third image caught and held their attention.

On the left is an eye tracking heat map. The red areas are where more time was spent looking at the screen, followed by yellow and then green. Notice how the second image got more attention. It’s the only image on this screen of a tattoo; both the other images are of storefronts.
THE EYE TRACKING RESULTS

Heat Maps

Here is a screen capture from video of one of the eye tracking sessions. The red dots are tracing the participant’s eye movement as they get ready to click on the image with their thumb. They have scanned across the positive reviews and are about to click on the image.

On this heat map, we see that even though Metamorphosis Custom Tattoo wasn't listed in the top position, the eyes were drawn to the positive reviews, and the listing outperformed the others on this screen, as evidenced by the clicks it earned.
We let participants use their own search terms, so generally people either tried the city name plus “tattoos” or vice versa. Since these were live Google Places pages, the order of the listings could vary slightly from one participant to the next. Nevertheless, we can observe important trends when listings are compared in these typical groups of three as they appeared for the search term with “tattoos” + “city”.

Winnipeg, Manitoba - Second Screen: Metamorphosis took 7 clicks here and Skin Dimensions took 2. Their 5-star reviews made the difference. Living Canvas is wasting its valuable listing real estate by not having reviews or an interesting image, but they still managed to get 1 click.

Edmonton, Alberta - Third Screen: After scrolling down past the first visible results, one person clicked on Raptor. Despite the bland picture of a non-descript locale, Crimson Empire received 4 clicks. Note that they have earned 5 stars in reviews from a total of 4 reviews, which offers more “social proof” than their competitors.

London, Ontario - Fourth Screen: By this screen view, it was all over with our twelve participants. The remaining companies are going to have to keep building up the positive reviews, experiment with images, and/or add their hours. It also looks like they will need to pay more attention to their overall online strategy to try and push their companies up closer to the top of the listings.

Hamilton, Ontario: Darkside has one review listing, and it was good enough to win the single click from this screen.
CONCLUSION
Insights on Google Places App Optimization

Eye Tracking Results
People typically start looking in the upper left part of the screen, scan from left to right, then move down to the next result, and scan from left to right again. However, given the small space of the iPhone screen, some people will have their attention pulled to the right to look at an image, and may continue a scan down to the next image, before resuming a left-to-right scan pattern. If they start scrolling down, then their gaze will stay on the left side until they hit a listing of interest. In the examples we used in this study, in almost every case it meant that they would scroll down until they hit a listing with a better than 3-star review.

When the top results have fewer social signals such as reviews, lower results get more visual attention. This presents an opportunity for businesses whose websites are not listed at the top; they can be more competitive by adding positive reviews.

Click Results
With twelve participants doing four tasks, we had a potential of 48 clicks. At the end of the study, we had 47 clicks, as one participant failed to complete one of the tasks. Still, we saw some interesting indicators that we recommend businesses carefully consider.

Recommendations
1. If a business website is listed in any position other than the top three, and the listing does not include any social signals, it will be relatively ignored, especially if there are other listings that do have social signals. In other words, get some reviews going on your listing!

Listings that had at least 3+ star reviews took 41 out of 47 clicks, therefore if a business does not have any reviews on their Google Places listing, it is certainly going to miss out on potential clicks. Positive reviews on the Google Places iPhone app were the biggest single factor we observed that determine which listings got clicks and which did not.

2. The number of reviews matters, too. This might become even more important as more businesses realize the value of reviews and start making more of an effort to get reviews on their listings. We found that 29 of the 47 clicks went to listings that had at least four reviews.

Images on the iPhone listings are very small, but people do look at them. Qualitatively, people told us that in the tattoo scenario of our study, they look at the images to see if the business looks trustworthy. The listings that got clicks were split between images of the storefront or of tattoo work, with no clear indication that one kind of image was more successful than another. However, if they paused on a listing because of the social proof offered by positive reviews, they would then look at the image before making a decision to click. Therefore, we recommend giving the image that accompanies a listing some special consideration, and remember that an image that might work on a desktop might not work so well when reduced to a phone.

Mobile Matters
In the previous study, we saw that with a little effort to manage your Google Places listing there is good potential to get a greater share of clicks on the page, and the same is true on the Google Places app for iPhone.

Optimizing your business listing for iPhone is particularly relevant when you consider the following data reported by IBM, concerning Cyber Monday sales in the US this past November:

- Cyber Monday online spending increased by 33 percent over 2010.
- Mobile devices including the iPhone and iPad, drove 6.6 percent of online sales.
- 10.8 percent of people used a mobile device to visit a retailer’s site, up from 3.9 percent in 2010.
- Mobile sales grew dramatically, reaching 6.6 percent on Cyber Monday versus 2.3 percent in 2010.

Retailers, in particular, cannot ignore this trend toward mobile shopping, and optimizing a Google Places listing is a good place to start.

To find out more about getting a business listed on Google Places, see www.google.com/local/add.

For a free consultation about your company’s online marketing strategy, contact us at info@mediative.ca.
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info@mediative.ca